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Contents

Page

EDITORIAL

"Strive to excel in building up the church."

I Cor. 14:12..... 3

THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF

FINLAND: A Brief Survey of its History, Organization and Doctrinal Complexion..... 7

Gerhard Aho, Professor, Department of Practical Theology

AN EXEGETICAL-DEVOTIONAL STUDY OF II PETER

1:16-21..... 18

Paul E. Jacobs, Pastor, San Mateo, California

BOOK REVIEWS..... 31

BOOKS RECEIVED..... 46

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

A Brief Survey of Its History, Organization and Doctrinal Complexion

GERHARD AHO

Early Period

THE CHRISTIAN church's history in Finland goes back about 1,000 years.¹ In the 10th and 11th centuries Finnish tribes traded and waged war with peoples of Scandinavia and Russia. Finland was also on the main Viking route to the east. The result was that Finland came under Christian influence from both east and west, from Southern Scandinavia which adopted western Christianity and from Russia which adopted Byzantine Christianity.

The year 1154 is generally regarded as the year in which organized Christianity came to Finland.² In that year King Erik the Holy, of Sweden, made a crusade into Finland. He had both a military and a missionary purpose: to stop Finnish raids on the Swedish coasts, and to Christianize the Finns. To achieve the latter, the king brought with him Bishop Henry of Upsala who remained in Finland after the king and his soldiers had returned to Sweden. Bishop Henry labored successfully for some months before meeting a martyr's death at the hands of a Finnish peasant on the ice of Lake Köyliö.³ Henry came to be regarded as the patron saint of Finland.

Despite the work of Bishop Henry, Byzantine Christianity continued to make its influence felt. Thus competition between east and west was an essential part of Finnish missionary history from the beginning. This competition proved to be decisive also in the political and ecclesiastical history of the country. The area connected with the Roman church was made a diocese with Turku as the center. From this diocese, within the church province of Upsala, developed the beginnings of historical Finland. The Orthodox area did not form a diocesan entity but comprised nevertheless a geographical unit in eastern Finland.

The first boundary between Sweden and Russia, and thus between Roman and Byzantine Christianity in far northern Europe, was drawn through Finnish territory by the Nöteborg Treaty of 1323.⁴ The border has been moved several times since with the result that ecclesiastical uniformity has been broken. Although in the sixteenth century Lutheranism displaced Roman Catholicism as the religion of the country, Finland today has two national churches. Out of a population of 4½ million, 92.3% belong to the Lutheran Church while 1.5% belong to the Orthodox Church.⁵

The Reformation in Finland

At the time of the Reformation, Finland was under Swedish rule. Yet the spread of the Reformation doctrines into Finland was not determined by events in Sweden.⁶ Before there was any incultation or implementation of these from Sweden, the seed from Wittenberg had been planted by Peter Särkilahti who returned to Finland from Germany in 1523. He preached and taught Luther's doctrines in Turku with scarcely any opposition. Särkilahti, who had married a German girl, was one of the first clergymen in northern Europe to break the vow of celibacy.

The next significant figure in the Finnish Reformation was Martti Skytte, a monk at the Sigtuna Dominican monastery in Sweden. Skytte traveled widely to universities in Italy and Germany. He was appointed superintendent of all the Dominican monasteries in Sweden and Finland. In 1528 at the age of 70 he was made Bishop of Turku. King Gustav Vaasa favored the evangelical cause and told Skytte to do the same. During the 1520's Finland's monasteries began to be depopulated. The church now lost many of its privileges. Much of its property was relinquished, while a large part of its income went to the crown. The crown even appropriated congregations' sacramental vessels. Changes were also made in the mass, although it appears that Skytte himself continued to observe it unchanged. His very important contribution to the Reformation was to arrange for no less than eight young men to study at Wittenberg between 1532 and 1550.⁷

The most gifted of these was Michael Agricola. Born around 1510, Agricola went to school at Viipuri and Turku. In early manhood he was deeply moved by Peter Särkilahti's teaching. Arriving at Wittenberg in 1536, he heard a number of the occasional lectures which Luther was giving at this time, probably the lectures on Genesis, and was present at Luther's academic debates. Luther spoke of Agricola as one "young in years but as far as study was concerned a very experienced man."⁸

Agricola worked closely with Melancthon whose philological skills and personality influenced him greatly. In 1539 he received his M.A. degree and returned to Finland. He was appointed rector of the infant university at Turku where he trained a new generation of evangelical preachers. Agricola is rightly regarded as the Reformer of Finland.

Alongside his teaching duties he began to publish books. The first grammar of the Finnish language appeared in 1542, a work which established Agricola as the founder of literary Finnish and the father of Finnish literature. But his greatest gift to the Finns was his translation of the New Testament into Finnish, a task which he began at Wittenberg and completed in 1543. In 1549 the church agenda was published in Finnish, and by 1551 he had translated one-fourth of the Old Testament.

During Skytte's last years Agricola served as his assistant. Having served three years as Bishop of Turku, Agricola died in April of 1557.

The Counter-Reformation and Lutheran Orthodoxy

Rome's efforts to win back Sweden and Finland were enhanced by the superstitious awe with which the Finns regarded Roman liturgical practices. The Finns were wont to say, upon seeing the elevation of the host in the Communion: "I saw today my God and Creator in the hand of the priest."⁹ A pastor wrote in 1575: "When God's Word is taught they readily go for a walk, lounge outside the church and talk among themselves. But as soon as the sermon is finished, they rush into the church to see the host raised."¹⁰ The old worship forms had too strong a grip on the Finnish peasant for him to take easily to the simpler Protestant worship, especially when the officiant was often carelessly attired and crude in his conducting of the service.

The Counter-Reformation was aided also by the activities of King John III of Sweden, a typical man of the Renaissance in his high regard for art and beauty.¹¹ Like his father, Gustav Vaasa, and his brother Erik XIV, whom he succeeded on the throne, John was well acquainted with theology. However, the central truth of evangelical Christianity he seemed never to have grasped.¹² Stressing the aesthetic aspects of religion, devotion for him had primarily to touch the emotions. It was therefore natural for him to try to restore the Roman Catholic liturgy which satisfied his religious yearnings as nothing else could. His marriage to the Polish princess, Catherine Jagellonica, a devout Roman Catholic, was another motivating factor in the king's action.

With the assistance of Petrus Fecht, a pupil of Melancthon, John III published in 1576 a new liturgy which attempted to enrich the evangelical worship by adding some of the parts which the Reformers had taken out. These had to do particularly with the Communion liturgy. Possibly because some of the copies of this liturgy were bound in red covers, it became known as the "Red Book." Many of the Swedish clergy immediately opposed the liturgy, but most of the Finnish clergy were quite willing to accept it. At the same time the king tried to reactivate the Finnish monasteries, but without success. He was more successful in enticing young Finnish men to study at Jesuit institutions, the Jesuit school at Braunsberg in West Prussia being most favored.

The king's close ties with Rome did not last long, however. When the papal legate Possevino visited Sweden in 1579, he noted that the king's ardor had cooled.¹³ The following year the Jesuits were expelled from the kingdom. The chief reason for this development was John's realization that the pope would not submit to his plan for ridding the church of controversial questions. A personal tie to Roman Catholicism was cut when his wife died in 1583. With the death in 1585 of Pope Gregory XIII and the accession to

the papal throne of proud, unyielding Sixtus V, John turned his back permanently against Rome.¹⁴

But even after all hopes of uniting Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism had faded, the king stubbornly insisted on the observance of his liturgy by the clergy. Now many of the Finnish clergy who had no objection to the doctrinal content of the liturgy began nevertheless to oppose it on grounds that the king had no right to force his will on the church. At the same time an ever larger number of both clergy and laity, having heard of John's consultations with the pope, became more aware of the treasure which the nation possessed in the Lutheran doctrine. During the decades of this liturgical controversy a generation arose which was established in Lutheranism and dared to set aside the liturgy more and more openly.¹⁵

John III died in 1592. He was to be succeeded by his son Sigismund who had already ruled Poland for three years and, as a faithful follower of the Jesuits, had crushed the Reformation there. In order to consolidate their forces for the battle which they feared was coming, the Lutherans held a meeting at Upsala in 1593. This meeting was arranged by Prince Charles, brother of John III, and was attended by 1556 Swedish and Finnish clergymen.¹⁶ At Upsala the "Red Book" was unanimously rejected and the Augusburg Confession was officially adopted as the confession of the Swedish-Finnish church. The Upsala meeting of 1593 can be regarded as marking the beginning of Lutheran Orthodoxy in Sweden and Finland.¹⁷ But it was not until after the Swedish crown passed to Prince Charles (Charles IX) in 1604 that the Protestant victory was assured. By uniting the people in the Lutheran faith, the Upsala meeting made it possible for Sweden and Finland to come to the aid of their afflicted co-religionists in Germany during the Thirty Years War. The help given by King Gustavus Adolphus was decisive in determining the Peace of Westphalia.¹⁸

The outstanding proponent of Orthodoxy in Finland during its first quarter century was Erik Sorolainen who was made Bishop of Turku in 1583. Sorolainen was one of those who had supported John III's liturgy. At Upsala he retracted his former stand and ask for forgiveness. Upon his return to Turku, he proceeded to implement the decisions of Upsala. A meeting was held in Turku in June, 1593, at which all of the Finnish pastors were given the opportunity to underwrite the Upsala decisions.

It was one thing for the clergy formally to reject the liturgy; it was another matter to carry this out in the congregations. In this last decade of the Reformation century the Finns were still strongly rooted in the liturgical heritage of the Roman Catholic period. It did not help matters when clergymen simply did away with Roman liturgical practices without explaining the reasons for it. The slowness of the Finnish church to eliminate the use of the candle and salt in Baptism and the elevation of the host in Communion aroused

the ire of Prince Charles.¹⁹ When Charles became king, he vented his wrath on the clergy and especially on Sorolainen.

Sorolainen's misery ended only with the death of King Charles in 1611. With the accession of Gustavus Adolphus to the Swedish throne, Sorolainen for the remainder of his life carried out his duties without interference from the crown. Sorolainen's most important single achievement was the writing of a 3,000 page sermon postil. His entire literary output, both qualitatively and quantitatively, must be regarded as one of the great accomplishments during the Reformation era in Finland.²⁰

Sorolainen's successor was Isak Rothovius who continued to strengthen the confessional emphasis of the Finnish church. Orthodoxy in Finland reached its height when, in 1686 under Bishop John Gezelius the Older, the entire Book of Concord was officially accepted as the confessional statement of the Swedish-Finnish church.²¹ At the same time the Lutheran church became the state church of the kingdom, under the jurisdiction of the king. All those who rejected the Lutheran faith or who spread other doctrines were threatened with banishment from the kingdom.²²

Pietism in the Church of Finland

The pietism of Spener and Francke found followers also in Finland. Swedish and Finnish soldiers had been sent to Siberia when Russia occupied Finland from 1713 to 1721. Francke's encouraging letters to them helped to bring about a religious revival in the camps, and sergeants and chaplains brought pietism back to their homeland.²³ The pietism of Count Zinzendorf spread into Finland about 1740.

What has here been alluded to is known in Finnish church history as the earlier pietism. It was followed by the intellectual and deistic currents of the Enlightenment and of Romanticism.²⁴ The so-called later pietism arose as a reaction to rationalism, the extremes of which were reflected in the attempt in 1817 to revise the Finnish Catechism. If the committee had had its way, the definition of the Lord's Supper would have read: "It is a holy act instituted by Christ in which we are reminded of the high duties of Christianity."²⁵

The main movement of the later pietism was that led by Paavo Ruotsalainen (1777-1852), an unlearned peasant from the province of Savo in southeast Finland. The basic characteristic of his Christianity was a recognition of God's greatness and man's insignificance. Man can but spoil, God alone heals. Therefore man's first and continuous duty is to learn to abandon his own works and to trust in God. When sins accuse, when troubles come, one must flee to the Savior and there await His help. Christ knows best when and to whom to give help. It is not for man to demand spiritual any more than material riches. He can only wait for what Christ gives.²⁶

On occasion Ruotsalainen, who did much preaching and counseling, urged his hearers to trust in the Gospel promises of Scrip-

ture. Yet he always expressed fear of mere head knowledge so that waiting, yearning and the inner feeling of Christ retained the emphasis in his religious outlook. Man must humble himself before God and wait for God to assure him of grace. God may see fit to keep a soul in misery for a long time, and then to give him but a glimpse of mercy. Ruotsalainen did not wish to comfort too soon. It was better to let God do it in His own time.²⁷

Ruotsalainen's brand of pietism has thousands of ardent supporters in the Finnish church today. The revival movement which he initiated is commonly regarded as being most typical of Finnish Christianity. It is one of the three revival movements that have preserved their vitality to the present day. All have a central organization, periodicals, and summer meetings which attract tens of thousands.

The Evangelical Movement

A second revival movement, the evangelical movement, arose as a kind of reaction to Pietism. The founder was Frederick Gabriel Hedberg (1811-1893), a pastor who experienced a pietistic awakening but then assumed a critical attitude. In September of 1842, after many inner torments because of a lack of assurance of God's grace, Hedberg had something akin to Luther's tower experience. He saw that his sorrow and waiting accomplished nothing and that he had only to grasp by faith the Word which assured him of forgiveness.²⁸ He discovered that agony over one's sins and the stress on one's wretchedness among the pietists often led people away from the assurance of salvation. Now he regarded those who waited for grace and who depended on the Savior's discretion as being still "under the law."

Thus while the pietists stressed longing for grace, Hedberg and the evangelicals after him stressed bold refuge in Christ's atoning death through which all have received forgiveness and peace with God.²⁹ More clearly than the other revival movements, this one gives prominence to Luther and to the Lutheran confessions. In addition to many of Luther's works, they have translated and published Walther's *Law and Gospel* and, more recently, F. Pieper's *Dogmatics*. The heritage of the Finnish evangelical movement is represented in the U.S.A. by the National Ev. Lutheran Church, the Finnish body which has now amalgamated with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The Laestadian Movement

The founder of the third movement was also a pastor, Lars Levi Laestadius (1800-1861). The movement originated in Lapland and there is something in it of the primal force and stark contrasts of Lapp nature. While the Laestadian movement stresses the proclamation of God's free grace, its special feature is the manner in which it links God's mercy with absolution as given by man. The Laestadians also hold that the church is the community of peo-

ple who live in faith in Christ and in mutual love. The church is identical to the Laestadian Christians.³⁰

Thus belonging to a Laestadian group is a condition of real Christianity. Friendship with outsiders can be regarded as a sin for which one must publicly repent. At present there are in Finland five separate Laestadian groups (7 in the U.S.A.), all living more separate from each other than from the main bulk of the Lutheran church. These divisions were an almost inevitable outcome of the legalistic emphases in Laestadianism. In spite of its many divisions, it is the most widely spread revival movement in Finland, having an estimated 200,000 members. In America this movement is known as the Apostolic Lutheran Church.

Features in Common

It is evident that the revival movements which arose in the Finnish church in the middle of the last century stand in strong contrast to one another. They, in fact, do not work with one another. It is surprising, therefore, that they did not lead to separation from the church, as in the case of the Methodists, the Baptists and the Pentecostals. The reason for this is perhaps to be attributed not only to the strong hold which the institutional church has on the thinking of the Finnish people but also to the fact that the movements have certain features in common.

They all hold the doctrine of justification by faith to be the very center of preaching and teaching. They want to be distinctly Lutheran. The doctrinal differences are stressed today especially among the laity, who continue to immerse themselves in the writings of the early pietistic leaders, of Hedberg and of Laestadius. Finnish clergymen, perhaps because of their training in a common theological school, tend to minimize the doctrinal differences and often as not are pietists, evangelicals or Laestadians simply because of home background.

Another feature common to the movements is the pietistic one which expresses itself in a shunning of the world and in the desire to draw clear lines between the world and the Kingdom of God. In many places abstinence from worldly pleasures such as dancing, alcohol and the theatre is considered to be the mark of a real Christian.³¹

Significance of the Revival Movements

The significance of these movements within the church of Finland is to be seen, first, in the stress which they lay on personal Christianity. The movements all emphasize that mere membership in the institutional church does not make one a Christian. Thereby they have helped to give priority to the inner life of faith.

Secondly, they have helped to prevent other non-Lutheran revival movements from making large headway in Finland. The largest non-Lutheran group, the Pentecostals, began work in Finland in 1917 and now numbers about 30,000. The Methodists, Baptists, Adventists, Congregationalists and the Salvation Army all be-

gan work around 1900 and have a total membership today of 15,000. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons began to work energetically after World War II.

The Roman Catholics in Finland number about 2,000, the majority being descendants of immigrants. Rome regards Finland as a promising mission field, for she has stationed a bishop, monks and nuns, and 22 priests in Finland. Very few of these, however, are Finnish-born. The mysticism of the Roman Catholic Church has a strong appeal to the Finnish cultural classes.

Thirdly, the significance of the revival movements is to be seen in the fact that they set the tone of the spiritual life of the Finnish church. The real spiritual activity of the church is carried on, for the most part, within the framework of these movements.

Other smaller revival movements within the church are the "Praying Ones," a branch of pietism which stresses praying in a kneeling position, and the People's Bible Society, a spiritualistic group that labors with an almost fanatic zeal.

Organization

The organization of the Finnish church is episcopal. Bishops possess the same apostolic succession as those of the Church of Sweden. However, no theological significance is attached to this in the Finnish church.³²

The church today is divided into eight dioceses, seven of which are Finnish-speaking. In a bilingual, Finnish-Swedish congregation, the pastor must serve both language groups.

In the administration of the diocese, the bishop is assisted by the Cathedral Chapter to which belong the Dean, two other clergymen and one layman who is a lawyer. The highest assembly of the church is known as the Church Assembly and meets every five years. The Archbishop is chairman. All the bishops are members by virtue of their office. The majority of the members are elected by the dioceses, the clergy electing 2/5 and the laymen electing 3/5. This assembly is authorized to decide on Bible translations, hymnals, agendas, catechism, etc.³³

The Church Assembly also decides on proposals to alterations in the church law which must then be confirmed and enacted by parliament and by the president. Parliament can only approve or reject the decisions of the assembly; it can make no alterations. This is one of the ties that bind together church and state. Another such tie is the appointment by the president of the bishops. The president appoints, however, from candidates elected by representatives of the diocese, being presented always with the three candidates who received the highest number of votes.

The state in turn includes religious instruction by the Lutheran church in the syllabus of all elementary and secondary schools. The state also pays the salaries of army and prison chaplains, the salaries of bishops, the expenses of Cathedral Chapters, and maintains one theological faculty.³⁴

All members of the state Lutheran church must pay a church tax which amounts to $\frac{1}{2}\%$ to $1\frac{1}{2}\%$ of an individual's income. Those who do not belong to the church do not pay taxes to it, but all business enterprises must pay a tax either to the Lutheran or to the Orthodox church.³⁵

Due to historical circumstances congregations are exceptionally large. As late as 1900 each town or rural area had but one congregation. Although in the last two decades progress has been made in dividing the congregations and in building new churches, the average is still 10,000 members. There is an average of only one clergyman to 5,000 people. The hold of the congregations on the majority of its members is very weak.³⁶

Worship

The liturgy of the Finnish church is similar to that of the Church of Sweden and is based on the Reformed Roman Catholic Mass. Until 1900 it was customary to partake of Communion at least once a year. That this is no longer the case is due partly at least to the fact that pietistic preaching put so much stress on the right attitude towards Communion that many who were weak in the faith deemed it advisable to postpone their Communion attendance.³⁷ With the possible exception of the evangelical movement, none of the revival movements stressed the significance of Holy Communion. However, it needs to be added that today a number of congregations celebrate Communion every Sunday, while most have Communion once a month.

Although in recent years church attendance has gone up, the average is still only 3/10% of the membership. The percentage represents regular church attendance. A large number go to church only at Christmas and Easter. One of the reasons for this, at least in the rural areas, is that the members often live quite far from the church and do not have automobiles. In areas where the influence of the various revival movements is still felt, the pastors often hold services in members' homes. Yet irregular church attendance seems to be a tradition of Finnish Christianity.

Doctrine

Although the church law of 1686 made the Book of Concord the church's official confession, the new church law of 1870, in Article One which is still in force, removed this confessional basis and prescribed only that the teaching of the church must be founded on Scripture. Understandably, doctrinal discipline can scarcely be maintained. Altar and pulpit fellowship was established between the Church of Finland and the Church of England on July 19, 1934, and similar fellowship was agreed upon with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland on July 12, 1954.

New Efforts in Practical Church Work

After World War II the church entered the field of family counseling, the need for which had been brought on by urbaniza-

tion, industrialization and secularization. Marriage counseling centers have been established in all the larger towns.

There are also pastors who devote all of their time to the problems of factory workers. Industrial seminars are held, the leaders arranging discussions between labor leaders, employers and congregations.

A few attempts have been made to stress stewardship as in the American churches in order to arouse a sense of economic responsibility in church members. The difficulty has been that everyone knows he pays taxes to the church so that all voluntary giving seems like something extra. A notable exception is mission work which has always been supported by voluntary gifts. Attempts have also been made to train parishioners to visit homes.³⁸

Mission Work

There are two mission societies in the Finnish church: The Finnish Missionary Society, and the Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland, the latter being an organization of the evangelical movement. The former works in South West Africa, Tanganyika, Formosa, Israel and Pakistan. It has 120 workers in all. The latter works in Japan and has ten workers. The oldest Finnish missionary area is Ovamboland, South West Africa. The Ev. Lutheran Ovanbokavango Church is now independent. This church of 120,000 members was welcomed into the Lutheran World Federation at Helsinki.

The Free Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

Religious liberty was granted by the state in 1923. Shortly thereafter seven pastors who had belonged to the evangelical movement left the state Lutheran church together with a few hundred members. Financial assistance from the Missouri Synod began to arrive two years later in 1925. The Free Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland was officially organized in 1928.³⁹

At the state Lutheran church assembly in 1933 a resolution was adopted which would have made illegal any Evangelical Lutheran Church other than the state church.⁴⁰ But parliament declined to approve of this change in the church law.

The Free Lutheran Church has become known and has been criticized to a much greater extent than its size would suggest. As the only confessional Lutheran church in Finland, it is desirous of bringing the Word to others as effectively as possible. Much attention has therefore been given to how the work might be better organized with respect to Sunday Schools, young people's groups, and ministerial recruitment and support.

The Free Lutheran Church is hampered by a shortage of pastors and church buildings. Wherever a church has been acquired, the work has gone ahead. The present and future pastors need their own parsonages and cars. The goal is to provide each pastor

with sufficient income to enable him to carry on his work without undue hardship. Despite its small size, this church offers real hope for the strengthening of confessional Lutheranism in Finland.

FOOTNOTES

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